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Letter dated 16 August 2000 from the Permanent Representative of Eritrea to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

On instructions from my Government, I have the honour to transmit a statement issued today, 16 August, by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Eritrea regarding the voluntary repatriation of Ethiopian citizens living in Eritrea (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would kindly circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda items 116 (a) and (d), and of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Haile **Menkerios**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

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Annex to the letter dated 16 August 2000 from the Permanent Representative of Eritrea to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

16 August 2000

Ethiopia has an obligation to receive its own nationals

The Government of Eritrea has recently initiated the voluntary repatriation of Ethiopian citizens living in Eritrea. This was induced by the massive population dislocation that occurred because of Ethiopia's war of invasion. Ethiopians dislocated by the war could not subsist in makeshift camps for an extended period of time. These constituted the majority of those being repatriated on a voluntary basis, although there were also a small number who had to be sent home because they lacked the legal status for residence. The International Committee of the Red Cross was briefed of this situation and requested to monitor the process as well as to provide logistical support for its expedition.

The repatriation process was hampered from the beginning by the Ethiopian regime, which refused to receive its own nationals, as international law requires. After falsely accusing Eritrea of "holding Ethiopian nationals in detention camps", the Ethiopian regime offered flimsy excuses for its refusal to accept the return of its citizens. Initially Ethiopia stated that it could receive only a maximum of 500 of its nationals at a time, even though it has on numerous occasions abandoned thousands of ethnic Eritreans at unannounced border locations. When this arbitrary restriction was overcome through the intervention of ICRC, the Ethiopian authorities raised, in order to suspend the planned repatriation, the excuse that an "alternative route" had to be employed. This obstruction came at the last minute, when ICRC had completed all transport arrangements for about 2,000 Ethiopians stranded in Sheeb.

Ethiopia's rejection of the ICRC-sanctioned Kisad-Iqa/Mereb route as "hazardous" was both spurious and cynical. The fact is that the route happens to be the same route through which Ethiopia deported Eritrean civilians, penniless and without any assistance, during the period when the repatriation of Ethiopians was scheduled to take place.

The Government of Eritrea waited for two weeks in the hope that ICRC would persuade Ethiopia to accept its own nationals. It even proposed to ICRC to arrange for either an airlift or transit through a third country. When these options were not taken up, the Government of Eritrea arranged for the repatriation of the Ethiopians through the safest routes of Tserona and Kisad-Iqa.

The international community is well aware that Ethiopia has:

- Deported about 75,000 ethnic Eritreans in a most inhuman manner;
- Confiscated their assets and properties;
- Separated families, deporting some while detaining others for later deportation;
- Broken up mixed marriages by deporting the ethnic Eritrean spouses;

- Prevented the voluntary repatriation of ethnic Eritreans while holding up or forcing out to third countries those of military age (over 5,000 have been forced to flee to Kenya alone);

- Uprooted entire ethnic Eritrean communities from villages which they built and developed over generations in western Tigray (39 villages and 15,000 people).

Moreover, the Ethiopian regime continues its incarceration of about 2,000 Eritreans in the Dedessa concentration camp where a dozen, including three university exchange students, have died under torture. There is also the grave issue of over 1,000 missing Eritrean civilians still unaccounted for.

Ethiopia's violations of the human rights of Eritreans have not been confined to its territory. It has, after confiscating their properties and livestock, expelled over 15,000 Eritreans from the areas of the Gash-Barka zone currently under its occupation. This is in addition to Ethiopia's wanton killings and destruction of both private and public installations and assets in all the areas of its incursion.

Although there were initial protests, such as those of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, the United Nations system, the United States Government, etc., the absence of effective response from the international community has allowed Ethiopia to perpetrate these gross violations of the human rights of ethnic Eritreans with impunity. Indeed, many Governments and international organizations refrained from openly condemning Ethiopia's atrocities in the name of "quiet diplomacy" or, as in the case of ICRC, owing to "statutory constraints" against speaking out.

The international community has consistently noted the absence of reciprocal action by the Government of Eritrea in the face of Ethiopia's persistent excesses. It is common knowledge that Eritrea has respected the right of Ethiopians to live and work in Eritrea as aliens without any discrimination and forestalled, by policy and action, inflaming communal relations or inciting ethnic hatred.

The reality of the massive dislocation and displacement in Eritrea of the civilian population, including tens of thousands of Ethiopians, resulting from Ethiopia's latest invasion, has imposed the need to provide for the repatriation of the affected Ethiopians. While such repatriation is voluntary for the overwhelming majority, it also includes those who are not entitled to legal residence. It must be underscored in this regard that the Government of Eritrea has duly informed and invited ICRC to cooperate in the process, requesting it specifically to facilitate safe and escorted transport. Eritrea's inability to ensure that the repatriation of Ethiopian citizens be accorded ICRC oversight results, as noted above, from Ethiopia's refusal to cooperate.